



# Gloria Naylor

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*I wrote because I had no choice, but that was a long road from gathering the authority within myself to believe that I could actually be a writer. The writers I had been taught to love were either male or white. And who was I to argue that Ellison, Austen, Dickens, the Brontes, Baldwin and Faulkner weren't masters? They were and are. But inside there was still the faintest whisper. Was there no one telling my story? And since it appeared there was not how could I presume to? . . . [Reading] The Bluest Eye [was] the beginning [of the ability to conceive myself as a writer] . . . The presence of the work . . . said to a young black woman, struggling to find a mirror of her worth in this society, not only is your story worth telling but it can be told in words so painfully eloquent that it becomes a song.*

— A Conversation with Toni Morrison

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1950
- \* African-American novelist
- \* Her first published novel was *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982)

## Biography

Gloria Naylor, first child of Alberta McAlpin and Roosevelt Naylor, was born in New York City on January 25th, 1950. Although she grew up in the largest urban center in the U.S., her roots were in the south since her parents had been sharecroppers in Robinsonville, Mississippi. Naylor's parents taught self-validation, independence, and self-confidence. Naylor's personality resembles her mother's -- timid, quiet, and shy. She also shares her mother's love of reading and libraries. In 1963 Naylor and her family moved to Queens, a more middle-class borough, which increased Naylor's awareness of racism.

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## Biography continued

Also in the same year, Naylor's mother joined the Jehovah's Witnesses and in 1968 Naylor followed in her footsteps. The Jehovah's Witnesses brought her out of her shyness and gave her a cause, community and opportunity for travel. They encouraged her already active imagination and believed in the power of the written word, which would have obvious importance to Naylor in the future. Unfortunately the Jehovah's Witnesses also isolated her from her own culture. There was an incredible explosion of black literature at the time and Naylor didn't even realize it. She witnessed for seven years, supporting herself as a switchboard operator, but eventually left the Jehovah's Witnesses because "things weren't getting better, but worse."

What followed for Naylor were years of transformation. From 1975-1981 she worked full-time as a switchboard operator, pursued writing and attended classes at Medgar Evers College, and eventually Brooklyn College. She discovered feminism and African-American literature which revitalized her and gave her new ways to think about and define herself as a black woman. In 1977 Naylor read her first novel by an African-American woman, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which gave her the courage to write. She began writing fiction in 1979 and submitted a story to *Essence* magazine, whose editor advised her to continue writing. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English, completed her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, and began graduate work in Afro-American in Studies at Yale in 1981.

Naylor calls herself a wordsmith, a storyteller. Her novels contain pieces of her personal life and familial past in the form of names, places and even stories. Her novels are "linked" together. She refers to characters and places in one text that become significant in the next text. Naylor also draws extensively on the Bible, which is influenced by her involvement with the Jehovah's Witnesses. She has an affinity, as do the Jehovah's Witnesses, for apocalyptic images and events and uses them in her novels. Her work reflects a moral and spiritual sensibility. She creates corrupt fictional worlds in which characters must find some sort of sanctuary to be safe.

Naylor's first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, is a celebration of the riches and diversities of the black female experience. She focuses on seven women who commit a victory by simply managing to survive in an impoverished and threatening neighborhood by bonding with each other and finding refuge. The novel received strong reviews, won many awards and was made into a television movie.



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## Biography continued

Linden Hills, Naylor's second novel, is a story of resistance and rebirth. It portrays a world in which black Americans have achieved status and some measure of power, but in the process they have forfeited their hearts and souls. It follows Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* by employing Dante's moral geography, adapting his narrative strategy as the journey through hell as her main organizing principle and offering an allegory intended to warn and instruct her intended audience -- black Americans.

Naylor's third novel, *Mama Day*, marks a signal change in her development. She uses alternating narrators which both reflects and reinforces the novel's thematic concerns with reality and truth. The novel is concerned with examining, deconstructing and redefining the past. Its strongest elements are the bonds shared within the female community and between the generations of women. It is "about the fact that the real basic magic is the unfolding of the human potential and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles," according to Naylor.

*Bailey's Cafe*, Naylor's fourth novel, explores female sexuality, female sexual identity and male sexual identity. "The core of the work is indeed the way in which the word 'whore' has been used against women or to manipulate female sexual identity," says Naylor. She also intends to employ the blues and jazz into the novel's structure by using lyrical language. The characters tell their own stories and sing their own songs which empower them to generate the hope for necessary living.

Naylor is currently working on her fifth novel, *Sapphira Wade*. She is also busy with her own production company, One Way Productions, which is intended to present positive images of the black community to as many people in America and around the world as possible.



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